

# *Like Kansas*

By

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## Abstract

*Like Kansas* is a collection on confessional and performance poems. The poems consider the historical perceptions of black womanhood and the black female body. I discuss that history in connection with my current experiences, particularly the racial and sexual microaggressions that I confront in my daily life. In the collection, details of my personal life merge with and juxtapose against those of other black women's lives, including my mother's to create an oppositional narrative that explores the complexities of black womanhood and resistance. That is to say my confrontations with issues concerning race, sex, and class are encoded in discussions of anger, the erotic, and the personal. Framing this as an example of oppositional poetics, my intention is to offer a pathway within feminist literature and scholarship that builds upon and extends the quest for identity, survival, and autonomy.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my mother, family, and dissertation committee.

## Table of contents

Toward an Oppositional Poetics in <i>Like Kansas</i> : A Critical Introduction	1
<i>Like Kansas</i>	30
Endnotes	92
Works Cited	94

Toward an Oppositional Poetics in *Like Kansas*:  
A Critical Introduction

In “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” Erica Hunt states “oppositional poetics and cultures form a field of related projects which have moved beyond skepticism to a critically active stance against forms of domination.”<sup>1</sup> She considers an expanded sense of poetics as one that invokes strategies for disrupting the binaries of fact and fiction and of identity and non-identity, ultimately closing the distance between writing and experience. For communities of color in particular, she argues that an oppositional poetics grows out of a long history of discrimination and marginalization by the dominant culture. This long history has fostered a collective identity and forms of resistance that are critical to survival. As Hunt argues, oppositional writing has been traditionally characterized as destructive not only to the entire social body, but also to itself. The objective of oppositional projects and those intellectuals who so engage, however, is to continue to locate themselves within a collective process, particularly to “find example and value with which to fuel present resistance”<sup>2</sup> to racism, sexism, classism, etc., and even meaningless alterations to the dominant culture’s terms. Oppositional writers in particular, whose practices have also been shaped by social movements and their demand for social transformation, produce critical views in language.

*Like Kansas* grew out of my critical interests in oppositional poetics expressed in the work produced by women and women writers of color throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. I find in their fiction, poems, essays, songs, films, and plays explorations and examinations of women’s complex subjectivities as well as strategies of resistance against the oppressions they experience in their specific political and social lives. Their opposition resists

power and domination, and seeks to remove the distance between writing and experience. I read women's oppositional writing as a literature shaped by demands for social transformation, a process that critically engages words and consciousness. These writers invent as well as work within and against various literary traditions and various social movements – feminist movements, the Black Arts/Power Movement, and Black Lives Matter – to provide insight into women's complex subjectivities. They construct and maintain literary spaces through which women (writers) can gain visibility as well as personal and political autonomy.

I examine my own writing, my poetry in particular, in oppositional terms. *Like Kansas* began as a scattered number of notes and personal stories about sex/sexuality and about my living in Kansas attending a predominately white institution as a black woman. I noticed common themes of race, gender, and sexuality connecting them. The poems mostly focus on the body and consider the historical perceptions of black womanhood and the black female body. I began discussing that history in connection with my current living, particularly the racial and sexual microaggressions that I confronted in my daily life. I found myself merging and juxtaposing details of my personal life with those of other black women's lives, including my mother's. I intended to compose an oppositional narrative that explored the complexities of black womanhood and resistance, locating my confrontations with issues of race, sex, and class within the collective.

In *Like Kansas*, discussions of anger, the erotic, and the personal converge with my readings of black feminist literature and scholarship. My goal is to establish an oppositional poetics that is deliberate in its quest for survival and autonomy, and its examination of racial and sexual politics. My confessional pieces and poetry performances assisted me in articulating

theories and concerns in (black) feminist literature as they relate to my experiences of erasure, sexual and racial violence, and of pleasure and healing.

### **Anger and the Erotic**

In "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic. Patriarchy and the male gaze have vilified and devalued the erotic by limiting the exercise of the erotic as the service women provide to men. Women, she argues, have been taught, "Only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong."<sup>3</sup> Misnamed by men and used against women, the erotic has been equated with the pornographic, which Lorde argues, is an opposite and direct denial of women's power to make their lives possible and less difficult/absent of oppression. She writes that empowered women are dangerous so we are "taught to separate the erotic demand from the most vital areas of our lives other than sex."<sup>4</sup> Lorde is speaking of the erotic as the life source of women, the creative energy that empowers women, the knowledge and use of it to reclaim language, history, and our personal lives; to nurture the emotional, the spiritual, and the political; and to work against various facets of oppression.

Erotically satisfying experiences appear both in the content and form of black women's poetry including Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow was Enuf* (1977). Several of the women speakers share their difficult experiences of rape, domestic violence, abortion, and loss. They discuss how they cope with the difficulty of being a black or brown woman in a racist, sexist society. The Lady in Blue states: "we gotta dance to keep from cryin'" and the Lady in Brown replies: "we gotta dance to keep from dyin."<sup>5</sup> Dance offers escape and healing from violence and trauma—a moment in which



they direct their own bodies and lives. Explicit choreography calls for the seven women to dance erotically singing to music as they perform their monologues. The choreography and singing are elements of the poem, as its language or creative energy evokes the experience through the body's movement. At the end of the choreopoem, the speakers are singing "i found god in myself/ & i loved her fiercely"<sup>6</sup>—affirming their erotic power to live and love themselves.

In her 1981 essay, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,"<sup>7</sup> Audre Lorde argues that anger, focused with precision, is a tool for radical change, a powerful source of energy appropriate for responding to racism—to exclusion, to betrayal, to the assumptions underlining the lives of women and women of color. As Rich argues in her essay, women, taught to fear anger, often recognize this energy as destructive to the image of womanhood and a divisive tool instead of a source of information and empowerment. Lorde provides actual instances of women's refusal to acknowledge anger as a valuable tool against oppression—the ways in which women might use anger as an act toward survival in a patriarchal world. The encounters reveal attempts to vilify the anger of black women, calling their expressions of rage threats to the progress and understanding between women of different racial backgrounds. Their responses to black women's rage refuse to examine the intersections of black women's lives, ultimately denying it a space in the feminist movement.

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) explores the potential erasure and liberation of the collective black body from the conspiracy of silence. For Rankine, anger is a communal or shared feeling. Actual anger, as Rankine sees it, exists in the body's memory. It is an ordinary and daily anger, something built up through experience and "taught to hold a distance for your own good."<sup>8</sup> She examines the black body's process of realizing and expressing anger

reconstructing memories of racism transformed into short prose poems. The poems, untitled and written in the second person “you,” contemplate how to respond to racial microaggressions, such as speaking back or calling out these instances. “You,” the black reader, desires to express anger, but often remains silent so as not to become overwhelmed from continuous confrontations with racism: “you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves a death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure [...]. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend.”<sup>9</sup>

Rankine argues, that through the expression of anger, we gain insight into the white and male imagination. Expressions of daily or ordinary anger long repressed make one visible, and can expose racist perceptions of the black body. Rankine’s essays on Serena Williams make clear the implications of expressing anger for black women in particular. In a number of her essays and prose poems that appear between the poems, Rankine calls out white spectators who characterize Serena Williams’s reactions toward the racism she experiences during tennis matches. In a poem in Section 2 of the collection, the reader, as spectator, observes the ways in which Serena is repeatedly “thrown against a white background”—trapped in a racial imaginary and “governed not by the tennis match she is participating in but by a collapsed relationship that had promised to play by the rules.”<sup>10</sup> Her expressions of anger on the court constitute “bad sportsmanship,”<sup>11</sup> but when she chooses to hold back, she has grown up, as if responding to the injustice of racism is a childish and detached from any external actions by others, “<sup>12</sup> rather than an act of resistance, of “fighting crazily against the so-called wrongness of her body’s positioning”<sup>13</sup>

## Confessional Poetry

The confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, and Adrienne Rich is often discussed in connection with second-wave feminism which began in the 1960s and lasted through the early 1980s. Attention to the relationship between power and the female body reflects second wave feminism's efforts to address sexuality and sexual violence, reproductive rights, and domesticity. Confessional women poets constructed a literary space through which women could write openly about their personal experiences as women in connection with the limitations that traditional gender roles placed on them. The confessional mode acts as a tool of collective self-definition—personal or private moments expressing agency and a political or collective erotic desire for self-hood that rejects patriarchal versions of womanhood. Twentieth-century confessional writers cultivate a personal voice writing openly about love, sex, and healing within the context of larger political and social issues. In a 1966 interview with *The Poet Speaks*, Plath stated, “personal experience is very important, but certainly it should not be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking experience.” She continues, “I believe it should be relevant to larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau.”<sup>14</sup> The speaker in confessional poems – the “I” – often reflects on the process of writing, naming, and sharing personal/private moments as critical for revising oneself, casting off patriarchal scripts of womanhood and sexuality, of racist, sexist history or damaging sexual politics.

In her 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” poet Adrienne Rich writes, “In the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman,”<sup>15</sup> referring to such poems as “Orion”. Rich urged women writers to refuse “the self-destructiveness of a male-dominated society”<sup>16</sup> and to reject patriarchal versions of womanhood and literary history. She suggests that this rejection or act of re-vision—“the act of

looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is far for [woman] more than a chapter in cultural history.”<sup>17</sup> Rich argues that this radical critique of literature and power “is an act of survival.”<sup>18</sup> It is a difficult and sometimes dangerous act in women’s search for language and images to represent their new feminist consciousness and impulses. Rich’s confessional collections *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Leaflets* (1969) demonstrate her deviation from controlled verse to free verse, as well as her feelings and insights into women’s private and public lives. The speaker in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” stands “Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before/an unlocked door, that cage of cages, tell us, you bird, you tragical machine--/is this *fertilisante douleur*? Pinned down/by love, for you.”<sup>19</sup> The poem is responding to the constraints of marriage and the unfulfilled promise that marriage would ensure happiness for white, middle-class women in the 1950s and 1960s. Reflecting on this poem in her essay, Rich’s admits that her use of “you” is too reliant on allusion as it precedes her courage to use the pronoun ‘I’ to apply experience and feminist consciousness directly to the self— to master the exploration and language of the highly personal in her critical discussions of women’s victimization and anger.

Rich’s canonical poem, “Diving into the Wreck,” conveys a desire to reject patriarchal versions of literary history in order to examine the ways in which the use of male language/judgment has “created problems for the woman writers: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and styles, problems of energy and survival” (1089)<sup>20</sup>. Rich, the speaker, is underwater exploring the constraints and damaging nature of patriarchal myths: “I go down./My flippers cripple me,/I crawl like an insect down the ladder/and there is no one/to tell me when the ocean/will begin.”<sup>21</sup> The poem illustrates a desire for agency and self-definition as it confronts the patriarchal damage and looks ahead to liberated society in the future. : “we are

the half-destroyed instruments/that once held to a course/the water-eaten log/the fouled compass.”<sup>22</sup> The poem additionally examines the relationship between power and identity, and explores how myths and distorted images of women shape identity and gender roles, similar to her collection *Snapshots of a Daughter in Law*. The non-binary speaker – “I am she: I am he”<sup>23</sup> – gestures toward a critique of toxic masculinity, rejecting myths about power, gender, sexuality: “We are, I am, you are /by cowardice or courage /the one who find our way /back to this scene /carrying a knife, a camera /a book of myths /in which/our names do not appear.”<sup>24</sup> Rich’s use of “we” strips the autobiographical/confessional ‘I’ of its singularity in her confrontation with (literary) history. Through her literal revisions of her poetry, she pushes the boundaries of the confessional mode from simply revealing the personal to reconciling language/text and experience, or writing and experience. Her use of “we” and “I” assist her in moving beyond objectivity and detachment to make women’s (and men’s) victimization and anger real, and her writing truly oppositional.

Confessional women’s poetry contains an explosive rage that attempted to free women and women poets of gender roles and literary constraints. In “What Are Patterns For?: Anger in Polarization in Women’s Poetry,” Alicia Ostriker notes a suppressed anger in early twentieth-century women’s poetry, in contrast to the “crackle of anger, free, at last” in women’s poetry after the 1960s, citing as her examples Adrienne Rich’s *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* (1965).<sup>25</sup> Plath’s *Ariel* employs an unrestrained voice speaking in a scathing and sometimes sardonic tone, which critics argue is directed at the poet’s mother and father, society and her contemporary literary world in general. After the publication of *Ariel*, feminist critics emphasized Plath’s anger in their portrayal of her as one of many women “driven to madness by a domineering father, an unfaithful husband, and the demands that motherhood

made on her genius.”<sup>26</sup> Often supported by voices of grief and suffering, women’s confessional anger represents strong reaction to their predicaments, which they consider vital to their self-preservation.

Several contemporary women poets honor those twentieth-century confessional women poets who have informed their confessional poetics, their creation of art and language under oppressive forces. In *Milk & Filth*, Carmen Giménez Smith acknowledges her anger through a specific form of lyric expression. She scowls at traditional gender fables as she destabilizes feminine narratives as told by men, as she does in her appropriation of Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” retitled “Diving into the Spoil.” In Giménez Smith’s poem, the speaker maintains a collective identity; however, she returns to the surface to represent the idea of finding one’s way out to a world or utopia in which women are succeeding/not being held back: “We slipped out of the water/and the hives were gone.”<sup>27</sup> In “Baba Yaga,” she shows her reverence for women who are made into villains: “Because she’s better-suited for unsolvable/Old World type villainy, I venerate/her in a story.”<sup>28</sup> In “Becoming,” the last section of her collection, she presents a new narrative of womanhood, motherhood, and femininity. In “A Devil Inside Me,” written after Ana Mendieta, the speaker battles for agency and vision. Her anger when transformed, produces a confessional or autobiographical *re-vision* of womanhood, motivated by her desire to achieve feminine agency. Giménez Smith demonstrates a desire to create art that revises traditional notions of black/brown femininity and empowers women.

While confessional poets like Rich, Plath, and Sexton also express anger in their writing, Giménez Smith’s use of anger reflects her complicated positionality and development of her feminist/erotic poetics. Giménez Smith works within a confessional tradition by complicating our understanding of anger in her responses as a woman of color, who is a poet, an academic,

and a mother. Many of her poems explore the objectification of brown bodies and the devaluing of artists as authorities of histories, who continue to produce art that works toward achieving women's agency: "I wanted to make bloody holes in the earth with my body like Ana Mendieta, but with poems."<sup>29</sup> "Parts of an autobiography" contains short numbered reflections in which Giménez Smith describes the type of poems she has encountered and has wanted to write. She refers to confessional women poets Rich, Plath and Sexton, describing their self-mortifying poems. Reflecting on their agency and oppression, and growing into her own feminist anger, Giménez Smith realized her need for or understanding of poetry. In her essay, "Blood, Bread, and Poetry," Adrienne Rich discusses the relationship between craft/poetic practice and social justice as well as racial and sexual politics. Admitting that the black Civil Rights Movement and the women's movement of the 1960s assisted in her writing directly and overtly as a woman, she began pushing the limits of literature to address experience, identity, history, and consciousness. She writes, "I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self."<sup>30</sup> Giménez Smith attributes her commitment to writing against convention and history to Adrienne Rich. For Giménez Smith, the confessional poem becomes a violent and bloody trace of history crafted to pull the body from shame and decay into power over language and self: "Confessional implies shame, whereas a scar is the trace of violence and/it's always connected to a narrative about the body and it is more than confession, perhaps emblem."<sup>31</sup>

Morgan Parker and Robin Coste Lewis are also among those women poets of color who undoubtedly complicate the confessional mode and its use of a personal lens for exploring race and class in addition to sexuality and gender. Representing concerns of black feminism, they view the erotic as a journey toward selfhood in which black women must consider the ways in

which a racist, sexist history has affected their personal lives and choices regarding their bodies and writing. They examine the impact of patriarchy in silencing anger and erotic knowledge, stifling the development and sustenance of their power as black women, in distinctly different ways from white women. Black women's poetry employs intersectionality as a strategy for explaining their lives; they evoke confrontation and subversion as central aspects of their confessional writing, a direct link to the erotic/oppositional poetics.

Though Parker does not identify as a confessional poet, she recognizes the mode's power—in revealing the personal to interrogate popular culture and history as they relate to black women's experiences. In *Other People's Comfort Keeps Me Up At Night*, Morgan Parker employs an unapologetic voice as she works to achieve a vision of herself in American patriarchal culture. In her series of poems, "Miss Black America," the speaker observes the pageant and examines the image of black women in white spaces/popular culture: "Is she a doll for you / does she come / with a special comb."<sup>32</sup> Parker also responds to the representation of black women on reality TV. In "title," the speaker's audition tape for a reality television show resists and toys with perceptions of the black woman as angry and the object of sexual desire: "can do angry, can't do/accent. I need a little coaching or provocation. Opinionated and/everything a man wants. Lips and boobs camera-ready."<sup>33</sup> Parker's charting and dissection of popular culture in the confessional mode, illustrates the ways in which interiority is bound to an examination of culture.

At the center of Robin Coste Lewis' *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015) is her epic title poem that draws on her interest in visual art to explain the black female body. She examines the black female figure in western art from 38,000 bc to the present, the ways in which black women as clocks, as paddles, armless and headless offer evidence of their long history as possessions,



objects, and devalued subjects. Lewis bookends and weaves throughout her lyric poems, self-portraits and descriptions of art by black women that interrogates race and gender, as upheld by institutions of art and history. As she states prior to the title poem, she intended to pay homage to black women as she examined their responses to their precarious positionality. In “I’m an artist through to my marrow” published in *The Guardian*, Angela Chen examines Lewis’ use of the epic and her attraction to the form’s fantastical elements –speakers who “shapeshift and fly.”<sup>34</sup> Lewis’s collection routes the black female body away from terror and patriarchal versions of the Venus as sex and object, and toward beauty, love, and empowerment.

Giménez Smith’s *Milk & Filth* appropriates historical feminist texts to examine patriarchal myths. Similarly, Lewis appropriates images in visual texts as well as their titles, catalog entries, and descriptions in order to examine their use of the black female body, and to develop a language or strategy for responding to racism and sexism. While Lewis left each title as published, she modified their descriptions with line breaks and missing punctuation. In this poem, the line breaks jolt the reader into the violence against the black female body: “Statuette of a Woman Reduced/to the Shape of a Flat Paddle//Statuettes of a Black Slave Girl/Right Half of Body and Head Missing.”<sup>35</sup> In the section two of “Element of Furniture Decoration,” she divides the poem into two sides: the left side lists objects “water jar/bowl/ointment spoon” and the right side indicates that the object is “in the form of swimming/black girl.”<sup>36</sup> Lewis’s manipulation of the description draws our attention to the ways in which the black female body is defined, sculpted as object and something to be used or handled. However, Lewis’ break in the description hints at her desire to resist history’s perception. Reading the right column alone, the black woman, though carved, is swimming and standing in opposition to history’s limitation and objectification of the body.

Lewis charts these moments in visual art concerning black womanhood, and personal moments regarding her black female body to begin a *re-vision* process of the black woman. Lewis' representation of black feminist concerns in the confessional mode demonstrates an intentionally violent oppositional poetics – the objective to shapeshift language, the body, and the visual toward critically resisting and interrogating the dehumanization of black women's bodies and ultimately history's denial of black women's agency, complexity, and multiplicity. She states, "I would like to go into the desert and write about salamanders and the Grand Canyon, but history keeps rupturing my experience because politics are everywhere."<sup>37</sup> Lewis carefully centers the title epic between sections one and three to demonstrate this persistent rupturing of the self. Her oppositional writing comes out of and exists within an expression of anger toward history and its perceptions of the self. Her anger is transformed to reveal desire such as in "Glinda the Good" where she prays that the image of black woman as a good witch, as creator or God portrayed by black female actress Lena Horne in *The Wiz* can be sustained: "Pray/there is something/like Her, something//hovering above us,/in whose palm/everything spins."<sup>38</sup>

Lewis' examination of the male gaze in the confessional mode is evident in her juxtaposition of autobiography with her examinations of problematic images of black women. Employing a raw and meditative voice, she questions where ideas about the black female body begin historically, and then how that history informs the personal, especially how black women perceive themselves, and confront their bodies and personal histories. The speaker reveals personal details in the first and last poem of the collection "Plantation": "I knew // I could tell you the black side/ of my family owned slaves."<sup>39</sup> In "Félicité" she admits "I realize I've spent my entire life // avoiding any situation/that might require me/to say these words aloud."<sup>40</sup> In an

interview with Nicole Sealey, Lewis admits she no longer wanted to hide behind a mask—that she desired to “use [her] private history publicly.”<sup>41</sup> Her poems explore how history, power, and convention justify assaults on the speaker’s body and prevent contact with the self.

In a poem such as “Lure,” the speaker wishes separate her physical body and memory from instances of sexual assault against her by a family member: “I am not three./You are not seventy nine./Your fishhooks fingers/are not toddling around my birdseed/nipples over and over again [...]/Grandmother/is not still sitting at her sewing machine, throttling/the pedal harder, louder. This is not your hand, your mouth.”<sup>42</sup> The catalog of body parts touching and moving seduce the reader into quieted moments of sexual violence at the hands of the speaker’s grandfather. Lewis’ repetition of the word “not” aggressively attempts to reject the violence. A poem like “The Wild Woman of Aiken” in Lewis’ collection begins to resist violence and conventions of womanhood by first describing the things women are denied including beauty. The speaker having been painted by a man states, “I am incapable/of having a voice.”<sup>43</sup> However, the poem ends with an unflinching and haunting voice “My head/is packed with eager seeds [...]/ You/cannot/ prevent me.”<sup>44</sup>—conveying in the confessional mode an erotic *re-vision* of the self in which the male gaze is denied, made powerless.

The speaker’s self-disclosure and truth telling within her historiography first closes the distance between reader and poet, and additionally between history and experience. It invites readers into a real, complex, and critical conversation about historical trauma. In the poem “On the road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari,” the speaker identifies with a female buffalo whose calf dies shortly after birth. The speaker observes and then shape shifts into the buffalo being pinned to the mountain by male midwives who force her to look “into the black/slick dead thing folded on the ground—.”<sup>45</sup> The memory of that moment will “sit/gently down inside my lap and look up

into me.”<sup>46</sup> The speaker, declaring herself as “a valley of repeating/verdant balconies,”<sup>47</sup> is made up of everything she touches and observes, of history repeating its rupturing of experience. The collection then, the title poem especially, is “history’s own confessional poem” as much as it is a confession or portrait of the self. As Susan Bernstein suggests in “Confessing Feminist Theory: What’s ‘I’ Got to Do with It?,” “confessional modes in feminist theory need not simply reify ‘experience’ and the politically oppressed identity of woman attached to it. [...] Rather, confessional modes furnish a strategy to explore the discursive and social constructions of subject positioning.”<sup>48</sup> The observations and shape shifting that takes place throughout the poems affirms the personal as inextricable from the historical—the inquiring/writing of the self as inextricable from the inquiring/writing of (patriarchal) history. The personal is historical, and the confessional poem is the “correspondence[s] between textual and historical subjects,”<sup>49</sup> or—again, history’s rupturing of the self and the self’s *re-vision* of the ruptured self.

## **Performance Poetry**

While some dichotomize the oral and the written poem, maintaining that the relationship as irreconcilable, there exists a complex relationship between the written and the spoken word. Voice, much like physical action, acts as the bridge between poem and audience as well as between poet and poem. Orality puts the voice and the written word in play with each other, and the poem is “performed outward from the written text rather than being simply recitations of it.”<sup>50</sup> In *Performing the Word*, Fahamisha Brown states “the complicated relationship between orality and the written word/recorded word must be teased out to clarify the nature of orality.”<sup>51</sup> She agrees with Walter B. Ong who stated in *Orality and Literacy* (1982) that “written texts all

have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings.”<sup>52</sup>

Brown provides the context for understanding the ways in which African American poets work within and extend a vernacular tradition that values the sound of language as well as language itself in the communication of meaning. Manifesting words as sounds and signs through voice intonations, poets make poems sing, and they transform everyday language into poetry. Brown writes that black vernacular traditions/language practices of signifying prayer, testimony, and sermon and “African Americans ways of speaking, intoning, and singing words lurk within the forms of African American poetry.”<sup>53</sup> As such, African American poetry, even in its written forms (the blues poem for example) displays characteristics of oral poetry, in which performance relies on word by mouth. Juxtaposing the written word with oral performance allows one to see similarities between the spoken and the written, such as the use of meter/rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and repetition (i.e. call and response, chorus, and refrain) in spoken word poetry.

Brown turns her attention to black women’s poetry and oral narratives, particularly the employment of distinct language practices on the page and in oral performances/recordings. She argues that black women encode race and gender in their oral poems, and that their poems should be read and heard as assertions of African American women about their difficult lives.<sup>54</sup> Beginning with the earliest Black women poets, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, the presence of themes, symbols, and traditions within black vernacular culture are decidedly black and female, relating specifically to black women’s multiple and complex quests for identity and strategies of protest and subversion. Listening to women’s oral narratives rather than reading the

written word allows audiences to “experience full impact of [their] manipulation of language,”<sup>55</sup> and ultimately, I would argue, their oppositional poetics.

As Angela Davis discusses in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, the blues songs and oral performances of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday are sites for examining an historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black families and illuminated the politics of gender and sexuality in working-class black communities in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Davis situates their songs and performances as important and distinct feminist texts in the canon of African American literature, as black feminist criticism tends to represent the novels by contemporary black women writers and speeches by black feminists<sup>56</sup>. The blues woman’s voice advises, boasts, and testifies in its rupturing of the fixed, damaged, and constrained black woman/female body into black women’s sense of themselves as free and empowered subjects. What Lewis might call the blues woman’s shapeshifting of the written in these texts produces an erotic *re-vision* of the self—the singing of their anger toward transforming gender relations and themselves outside of a white and male dominated history and world. The nature of orality in the blues song is much like the nature of an oppositional poetics in further closing the distance between writing and experience. The oral poem, much like the blues song in a black feminist poetic embrace of the black vernacular, closes the distance between voice and resistance written on the page and resistance spoke— anger and erotic knowledge/power made palpable through hummed, crooned, and preached language.

In the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, blues rhythms and the black vernacular convergence with direct and compact poetic forms such as the haiku and tanka (“short song”). In her first collection *Home Coming* (1969) sounds of her poems extend from the blues poems of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. The blues poem typically explores themes of sex, longing, struggle, and

despair, as well as resilience and determination. Like fellow Black Arts Poets Jayne Cortez and Amiri Baraka, Sanchez employs the voice as a musical instrument in her blues poems, as she explores black identity, celebrates black culture, and addresses black womanhood. Her vocal techniques in addition to her humming and laughter are not always or adequately represented on the page; however, her performances convey her manipulation of sound and language as necessary in creating consciousness and resistance through various poetic forms.

Sanchez's second collection *I've Been a Woman* (1978) includes an additional embrace of the blues poem. In "Present," she extends blues rhythms and black vernacular tradition to articulate anger and her expression of black feminism: "there is no place/for a soft black woman./there is no smile green enough/or summertime words warm enough to allow my growth."<sup>57</sup> Sanchez calls attention to black women who are stereotyped as strong and therefore capable of enduring repeated oppression. The poem comes between several haikus and tankas in the collection, as to interrupt traditional form as well as tradition and history, which are the root cause of black women's anger, pain, and distorted perceptions of self. In response, the speaker attempts to make history's perception of the self smaller than the self—"I see my history/standing like a shy child."<sup>58</sup> This reflection takes place just as she begins to give the black woman agency and power over her body and spiritual growth.

The repetition and pauses of and between words such as "dancing," "singing," and "sound" in the second half of the poem imply movement and indicates her potential singing of the lines: "hay-hay-hay-hay-ya-ya-ya" and "with new breaths/ and my singing/becomes the only sound of a blue/black/magical woman. walking."<sup>59</sup> The speaker's erotic voice, shifting from anger and pain to a more joyous tone resembles the voice of the blues woman who is often constrained and manipulated but becomes sure of her anger and her power. The singing

emphasizes the poems use of the black vernacular tradition to create imagery and movement that reflect black women's freedom. If the singing were actually performed, the vocal inflections would reflect a celebration of black women making contact with themselves. The poem's orality makes clear her longing to rewrite black women as magical, self-confident owners of themselves in a patriarchal world.

She has also performed a number of poems – new and outside the collection – on *Def Poetry Jam* including “Poem for Some Women.” The speaker in the poem is a single black woman addicted to crack who takes her daughter to a crack house. Sanchez sings the following lines, repeating and varying her inflections: “I’m alright/I said I’m doing okay”<sup>60</sup> before she reveals that she walked away as a drug dealer raped her daughter. In the second half of the poem, the voice in the poem becomes the daughter’s voice. Sanchez’s repetition of “momma!” and her singing of it stress pleading and cries for her mother. The poem’s orality is meant to evoke sadness and action in listeners against the continuous sexual violence against black women and girls. The clapping Sanchez conjures from the audiences (call-and-response) affirms the power of her participation in black poetic/vernacular tradition, particularly her sounded/blues-ed language, to spark movement or attitudes toward social change.

Sanchez is often honored as a predecessor or literary foremother to contemporary black women’s performance poetry. Like fellow Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka, she has performed in a number of contemporary black performance spaces including, *Def Poetry Jam*. Featuring Black Arts poets in such spaces makes clear the ways in which their embrace of black oral tradition parallels contemporary black performance forms, such as spoken word, slam poetry, and sound poetry. Like Sanchez’s blues poems and Black Arts poems, spoken word poetry often incorporates musical forms (i.e. blues, jazz, hip-hop), call-and-response/audience engagement,



singing/vocal inflections, boasting, and body movement. In “Contemporary ‘Black ?’ Performance Poetry,” Birgit Bauridl argues that there are two major features that connect Black Arts and contemporary black performance poetry: “the emphasis on performativity and the subversive, political character.”<sup>61</sup>

In spoken word performances, the poet-performer (as griot or storyteller) utilizes oral techniques and body movement to tell stories, boast, and interact with an audience, as well as to decolonize knowledge about black experience/identity and to disrupt language. Some spoken word performances appropriate and subvert oral techniques and black vernacular traditions, such as Patricia Smith who harnesses boasting to produce a poetics that empowers black women, especially in persona spoken word poem, “Medusa.” Black women spoken word artists, working within and extending black vernacular tradition, sometimes translates their oppositional poetics (as written or unwritten/memorized text) into physical movement, much like Sanchez and blues women who sing their oral feminist texts.

In *Word Warriors*, Alix Olson and Eve Ensler explore the poems and spoken word and slam performances of black women poets such as Sarah Jones, Patricia Smith, and Tracie Morris. She describes their performances as representing feminist voices, noting the performance genre as giving women tools to empower themselves and women in the audience. Olson states, “these poets build upon our political and feminist/womanist vertebrae, contributing unabashed and flawed, precise and untethered voices to the spine of persistence.”<sup>62</sup> These women’s performances assisted in the development of the spoken word movement “as one of the most undiluted expressions of art available to women, particularly as a vehicle for social change.”<sup>63</sup> The anthology explores the ways in which words, in the body and mouths of these contemporary women performance poets, powerfully confront racism and slam misogyny in a male-dominated

space, much like the work of Black Arts Poets Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni who critiqued the social, sexual, and political inequalities of the 1960s Black Power Movement.

Sarah Jones performances of “Your Revolution” on *Def Poetry Jam* move between movement and orality as she responds to sexism in hip-hop songs/community during the 1990s. Her movements—pointing, tightly gripping the microphone, and her arms chopping at the air—flow from the resistance behind lines such as “your revolution will not happen between/these thighs.”<sup>64</sup> She is subject rather than object, moving violently against gender politics, patriarchal fantasy of her female body as something to be smacked up, flipped, and rubbed down. In “Ain’t a Woman,” Kai Davis slams three fingers into the air to emphasize how many times she has said “no” in an instance of sexual assault. She holds her hands up to halt white women’s idea of feminism as relying on a common experience of gender. She repeats Sojourner Truth’s “ain’t I a woman” as she turns her hands through the air to illustrate the continuous and repeated marginalization and erasure of black women’s bodies and experiences in discussions of womanhood and women’s rights.

Spoken word allows poets to work from the body’s memory to express or reconstruct anger through movement in addition to word and sound. The body’s memory, as Claudia Rankine argues in *Citizen* is a source of actual anger evoked by racism. The use of the body and language is necessary, for black women, in dismantling patriarchal narratives and communicating frustration with racism and sexism. Women performance poets are not performing anger or feminism, articulated or illustrated in a written text, rather embodying or assisting in the communication of it. Often in spoken word performances, women poets embody concerns of black feminism, such as black women’s invisibility in white spaces and sexual violence justified by racist, sexist perceptions of black women. Movement assists in their

confrontations with racism and sexism, their resistance and healing. While head movements, hand gestures, facial expressions function in non-feminist performances and performances by male spoken word artists, movement is significant to women's poems and narratives as it manifests sexual autonomy, the desire to take up space, or to gaze back, as communicated through women's spoken words and written text.

Former slam artist and sound poet Tracie Morris suggests that the physicality of words, as we hear them, drives the performance poem. Her first sound poem "A Little" contains only one line: "I'm just a little girl." Morris varies their sound, pace, and inflection of the words to compose a poem on the sexual abuse of young girls and their related feelings of sadness and isolation. In her poetics essay "Sound Making Notes," she discusses her sound poems, specifically their vocal features, as growing out of her blues, hip-hop, and slam poetry. In her sound poems, these subsets of performance poetry converge, as well as diverge from them to work more with sound and to create a visceral call-and-response.

Working with the body through voice started with Morris's hip-hop poem "Project Princess" known for its vernacular, word play, and rhyming: "her black thighs/making guys eye"<sup>65</sup> as well as its facial expressions and physical movements characteristic of slam poetry. She speaks—almost sings, almost raps the lines the celebration of black women living in housing projects: "multi/multi dimensional / don't step with that de la's from '88/ don't step with that de la's from '88." She also employs this form of recitation in her sound poems such as "The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked." In one performance of this poem, she beats her hands against her chest to create the sounds of slaps. The words she utters such as "my heart/my heart" then enter and transform into or are performed as slaps, chokes, and hyperventilation to carry a narrative on

domestic violence. Like in “A Little,” Morris repeats and violently shifts intonations of the same word or phrase to reflect the emotion and physical feelings of abuse.

Morris notes that her sound poems evolve through repetition and performance, which she sometimes improvises. In the performance of “The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked,” she moves her fingers almost like she playing a flute, as if she is manipulating her voice to create a language or sound for opposition. Like the songs of blues women, *listening* to Morris’s poems is most impactful. Her sound poems make clear the significance of the body—performativity and physicality—in the development of language and resistance, in opening the ear to consciousness.

The performance poem, much like the confessional poem, is rooted in a necessity for a critical and visceral language. Sound poets, spoken word poets, and blues poets craft oral poems and performances that push language beyond convention and against silence. In the performance poem, anger is transformed through voice and movement. Language is made to embody the concerns of the body.

## **Conclusion – Convergence**

The first memories I have of myself as a performer date back to my enrollment in BalletMet in Columbus, Ohio. From age eight to around age twelve I studied jazz, modern, and Afro-Caribbean dance forms with April Berry. Then from age 15, shortly after the passing of my mother until age 18, I danced with a hip-hop dance team, under the direction of Tamara White. I understood the body as an instrument in conveying emotion and tradition. Between my studies with Berry and White, I began writing poetry. The first poem I performed in front of a crowd talked my relationship with my mother and her relationship with men. *Def Poetry Jam* was my

introduction to poetry as a performance and oral genre. I came to understand that poems are to be read aloud or performed—that performing and/or speaking poems emphasizes the written or manifest the poem as a form of complex expression. Growing up watching *Def Poetry Jam*, I witnessed black and brown poets from across the United States, as well as Black Arts Poets like Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, and black popular musical artists like Jill Scott and Common recite poems, sometimes from memory, and perform them with their whole bodies and complex vocalizations. The poets, many introduced as spoken word and slam artists, were performers of their words, emphasizing written text with voice intonations, body movement, hand gestures, and facial expressions.

Black women's spoken poetry assisted me in crafting an oppositional response to racism and sexism. *Like Kansas* first existed as a written text before I began thinking about how I might draw on my interest in dance and the movement of spoken word poetry to help me shape and communicate my opposition to live audiences. The body remains a significant theme in my work as I explore my reality as a black woman in graduate school and in places outside academia.

My performances of *Like Kansas* have been in front of predominately white audiences, with the exception of one. Reviewing the footage of performances of my poems “Body in the Locker Room” and “Movement,” I am standing firmly in front of the audience, gazing into the eyes of white men and women, shaking my finger as I mouth *no*, you can't touch my hair, bitch or my body. In performances of poems “Preclude” and “Like Kansas,” I am embodying an unabashed sexuality, swaying seductively against respectability politics that suggest my body needs taming. Employing movements, or rather allowing them to flow from my body's memory of personal experiences of racism and sexism, my poems are articulations of black feminism's ideas of healing and resistance. The body and physical movement of that body, for many women

poets and me, are powerful tools for creating poetry in which we communicate, resist, and respond to our various positionalities. The movements in my performances also manifest my desire to look back/shift the gaze, as well as to defy respectability politics and fixed narratives of black womanhood.

The voice I use to read or perform poetry has changed over the years. Years ago, I recited words at a rapid pace because I assumed memorization and flow to be an important measure of accomplishment by a spoken word poet. Now as I write and perform, I am thinking more about breath/pauses, as well as vocal range and inflections to convey/evoke emotion or to emphasize words significant to understanding the poem and my overall poetics. These decisions are sometimes represented on the page through line breaks and slashes such as in “Sunday 9:19pm CT.” *Like Kansas* employs such language practices and poetic devices on page as well as in oral performances/recordings. Oral performances allow me the space to experiment with the range and inflections of my voice as an artist, similarly to poets who are not identified exclusively with the spoken word tradition engage in nonetheless, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and Lucille Clifton.

My own disposition is more like that of Jill Scott, and Ursula Rucker. For a long time, I wanted badly to be a singer or shift between poet and singer like artist Jill Scott in spoken word performances like “The Thickness,” and I wanted to compose an audio album of spoken word performances similar to Ursula Rucker’s *She Said* (2011). Ursula Rucker’s *She Said* often employs singing, humming, and shouting like in her poems “Stop Calling Me!” to claims space for healing and self-care: “mmm mmm/leave me alone.”<sup>66</sup> Scott’s also sings and hums explicit language in addition to laughter in her poem “The Thickness” in which she addresses young

women's self-worth, and how they hypersexualization of their bodies: "they want to fuck her/[...]/there is more underneath that thickness/that sweet and round brown supple bigness."<sup>67</sup>

*Like Kansas*, explores my similar feelings/experiences and often relies on oral performance as an addition to the written text to convey anger toward being treated as a sexual object, toward my mother's death, etc. My collection seeks to convey anger as necessary in examining history and critical in obtaining political and personal autonomy. I created audio recording of several of the poems such as "Look:" and "Body in the Locker Room" where anger is evident in word choice and repetition, and then preserved and illustrated through pauses and inflections of my voice. At times, I attempt to convey grit or anger by deepening my voice. Orality in these poems not only illustrates actual anger, it is meant to push back against the attempt to stifle and vilify black women's anger as divisive instead of as useful in achieving the erotic and confronting power. The oral recordings would stress the voice as an instrument in embodying my black feminism.

My performances, existing as written text and oral performance, derive from black oral tradition and black vernacular culture. As such, I have come to understand my role as performer to interpret and tell stories, and to allow the poem to become also physical actions that assist in this process. Similar to black women spoken word poets, my poems where I explore historical perceptions of the black female body often employ movement that demonstrates a resistance to racism and sexism, reclaiming my black female body, power, and femininity. The recordings would also illustrate the location and transformation of language to dismantle myths about black womanhood, as in confessional texts by women poets of color Robin Coste Lewis, Morgan Parker, and Carmen Giménez Smith.

I have always been interested in personal poetry. Many of the *Def Poetry Jam* poets I watched performed political poems about race, gender, class and sexuality. They also performed poems with autobiographical details in connection with political subjects. During my sophomore year of college, I encountered and became interested in the politicization of anger in women's confessional poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. Raw, open, and direct, it responds to their precarious positionality derived from real experience of marriage, motherhood, and mental illness. For me, confessional anger emphasizes and validates, allowing the reader to follow the speaker in my poems through her encounters in both public and private spaces, which predominately white, including the locker rooms and yoga classes.

The exploration of the personal as an erotic force in the confessional poetry of Plath, Sexton, and Rich informed several of the poems and oppositional writing in *Like Kansas*. For example, Plath's erotic elegy, "Daddy" explores Plath's personal anger and grief toward her father's presence in her life as well as his death. The development of control over her body and voice is driven by Plath's critique of several violent patriarchal figures as representations of her father. Likewise, the erotic elegies in *Like Kansas*, though directed at my mother, address and confront the presence of male/patriarchal figures and the gaze as denying her agency and affirming fear in her power. Like Plath's elegies, at times they flirt with death or the personal desire to die as an oppositional strategy to freeing and owning the self, revising the existence of the self outside patriarchal ways of living. I question if my mother's decision to risk her life by undergoing weight loss surgery was related to black women's desire to feel weightless and beautiful in a world that has treated them poorly, and has wanted them dead. The confessional mourning of our parents is this tool in pairing the personal and the political, specifically locating and taking back the self from our often-damaging political and personal histories. Like Adrienne



Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," I use my anger with her decision and my conflict with patriarchal attitudes to assist me in revising and dismantling those narratives that reinforce a negative sense of self.

Much like contemporary women poets of color Lewis and Giménez Smith, who interrogate patriarchal and feminist art and history, poems like "Lutie's Advice on surviving black and woman" allude to twentieth-century black women's novels, such as Ann Petry's *The Street* (1936) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). I set out to examine perceptions and narratives of black womanhood that inhibit and circumscribe women's behavior and actions. I intended to express interest in the various ways in which black women across periods and traditions encounter oppression, as well as how black women writers choose to respond to their positionality and contribute to the representation of black women as multiple and complex persons, valued subjects through their poems. Like many black feminist texts, by interrogating the gaze, I wanted to construct a radical black female subjectivity, through which black women address the functionality of personal and sexual agency, critiquing and defying the gaze in search of self. Similar to Lewis' "Lure," I consider how power lures itself into my black female body without permission. Poems such as "Look:" "Bloom Time" and "Toward the Body" attempt to convey a deliberate yearning to recover the spirit and body from patriarchal trauma experienced in toxic relationships, abortion clinics, and a yearning to ultimately own the truly erotic self.

These confessional poems also illustrate a journey toward (re) claiming language for writing the self. The grit and anger of my written word and oral performances, as well as themes of sexuality and femininity, are supported by colloquial and explicit/sexual phrases, much like the works of blues women and confessional poet Morgan Parker. Parker's "All they want is my

pussy my money my blood” makes a clear connection between the haunting and hypersexualization of black women and the speaker’s rage, depression, and isolation: “I do whatever I want because I could die at any minute/I don’t mean YOLO I mean they are hunting me/I know my pussy is good because they said so.”<sup>68</sup> The poem’s tone reflects the speaker’s yearning and desire, as well as her attempt to examine her reality as a joke being played on her: “Okay so I’m Black in America right and I walk into a bar.”<sup>69</sup> The explicit and highly sexual language in confessional and spoken word poems like “Body in the locker room” is necessary in portraying and embodying raw anger and desire, un-stifled and un-vilified by the white imagination.

## I HAVE RESISTED

I have resisted

naming my dissertation after the sex and the personal:

*I fuck my man so good, he takes out the box of trash sitting outside my front door:  
pussy poetics and the black macho.*

And I want to apologize to my neighbors

but black women have never been able to fuck

so loudly or shout about it when it isn't demanded from the body—

and because I only fuck if the dick is political

and today the dick is good and heavy

and asks me questions like,

will I keep fucking him until he comes?

## BODY IN THE LOCKER ROOM

In the locker room we are all naked or beneath white  
towels, towels too small to fit my thick ass frame  
so I have to tie the white towel mostly at the waist and let my brown  
titties bounce out loud in front of white women and mirrors.

In the mirror I am the only black body. The two Latina women tease each other  
tease each other's brown bodies, say to each other, *you white as fuck today*,  
replace brown for pale and talk about tanning as I laugh and polish my tender  
brown skin with coconut oil and take down my hair.

The white woman next to me asks about it:

She asks how long I've been growing it, says she has always wondered  
how [Black women] do that shit—tie their coarse black hair in knots,  
and asks if she can touch it.

I tell the bitch *no* and want to ask her if she learned that shit in White women's studies—

I want to ask the bitch if she went to college, if she took her white body to college  
if she knew black women don't play that shit—

*you can't touch my hair, don't touch my hair bitch,*

we hardly do shit like white women

even fuck and laugh and teach women's studies

and I know they say all we want to do is fuck their men—

and she asks like why I'm so angry like

all she wanted to do was touch

NOT WITHOUT KANSAS

It is when I am in Kansas  
that laughter enters me through the shoulders  
makes me stain your chocolate couch  
with coconut-oil arches...

There we do herb rituals—mimic earth to fire...

my small coughs mimic your love energy stuttering back to you.

You feel like my only God  
when your tongue swipes my touch  
when you make me mimic my own vibrations  
or stir me.

There we have children that laugh like us  
I make love to you with my hands at the edge of my mouth.

And I want to say something about loving you  
but gargle your kiss in my throat—

LIKE WANT FOR HAVING

Sometimes it is the yellow-spotted bananas  
on my refrigerator that make me think of you—  
not for your touch or for the chocolate, but because  
of the time you went to work and left me at your place,  
said that if I got hungry,  
that I could have anything I wanted.

I thought if you had bananas, I would crump dance in your kitchen.  
but, no, you did not have bananas, so I ate your peanuts and drank your  
last bottle of water, thought about how you said  
I could have anything.

I wondered if hunger is            why women get married,  
not for the bananas,  
but for the company and for the having anything.

I wonder now, if hunger is            why men send me strange messages  
about how they want to spit in my throat,  
or call me baby or sweetheart and ask me  
to say what I want  
to do with their dicks and my tongue—

I have only wanted to eat *you*  
*and ripe bananas*, and sometimes only want  
to eat  
*you and I dancing in your living room,*  
*taking shots of red bull and 1800*  
*like you have no idea*  
I conjured you.

## IF MY MOTHER WERE ALIVE

If my mother were alive, we'd talk about our men.  
We'd laugh throw our heads back push  
each other at the shoulders say remember the man  
you left early in the morning and when you got dad  
to say that he was gay so that whatshisname wouldn't  
think you were still sleeping with him.  
She'd tell me that not all men can be conquered that easily  
and that she'd had wanted to really be loved by a man  
but they only wanted her because she was beautiful.

My second cousin calls me Tracy sometimes.  
She says I sound like my mother when I laugh.  
And she says I don't take men seriously either  
and only fuck them just want to fuck them.  
I want to tell her it's because I am black and a woman  
and want a chance at my own body  
that mommy's surgery was her having a chance at her own body  
that she fucked men because we all have learned to fuck men  
but I think Pam knows all of this.  
She is a black woman too.  
She knows the lives of men because each of the men she married  
died— widowed her.  
She tries not to remember running  
to the alley and discovering bullet holes  
in her second husband's chest.

I want to know why my mother  
wanted the surgery  
positioned herself as fixable  
a black woman            a black female body

sex and body and color  
in need of cutting and blending  
like to be too large and too dark.

I'd ask my mother if she really believed the doctors  
that her body was too much  
if she thought it too heavy and wet when she tried  
to hold or touch herself.

I'd lean on my mother  
ask if she thought her body was too much  
the way my body is too much when some of the men look  
at me and all the scholars look  
at me like my body is black and female and fixable  
or like my body is black        and female        and fixed



RE-MEMORY TWENTY-EIGHT

After twenty-eight years my sister has come up  
Her body is large and brown like my mother's  
Her locs are palm-rolled like mine – she cuts them at shoulder length  
so she is bald headed now  
We discuss the dream she has about how heavy they made her

Tiffany and I are both named Nicole for our mother's best friend Nicki  
She and I, almost womb partners, just ten months  
apart look each other in the eye over video chat  
and she tells me my mother almost gave me up, too—

My brother says the giving up of our sister  
is the very reason I was kept  
or it is the very reason I was made, or

I must haunt my sister  
since our mother is dead

## WHERE TO BEGIN FOR THE ANSWERS

When I learn Tiffany and I  
are only ten months apart, I have questions  
mostly for my father. I mean what anyway do I ask my mother  
of such a decision of any decision she's made?  
She is dead anyway—

I discover one of Tiffany's adoption search forms on the Internet  
and I learn she begins looking for answers at 15  
working only with the description the court gives her at birth:  
my mother is black and female  
her father is tall

## TOWARD THE BODY

I can't stop looking at children  
I keep picking them up and imagining they are mine  
Their noses, their fingers, the way the little girl's eyes  
have taken the shape of chocolate almonds.  
If her name is Aniyah or Olivia, I know God is fucking with me.  
I pick her up and want to kiss her, but just tickle her arms  
so her mother doesn't think I'm lonely or begging—

I still have the panties I wore five years ago  
They are pink and stained  
the nurse was brown and pregnant and offered me a cookie  
I laughed but I cannot remember if I took it  
I know it was chocolate and had cream in the middle  
I know she made me sign one last piece of paper  
and told me where to find the exit

Sometimes in public I caress the whole of my belly  
I imagine I am lying across the bed in B's duplex  
as he searches for abortion clinics and writes down prices  
or my breasts are leaking white onto his bed  
or six and a half weeks too late to do anything about

Really I just lay there as the doctor vacuumed  
her flesh-blood body from mine  
only imagined lifting my body up from the table  
my pussy dilated and bare  
and running out of the room—

B wanted confirmation  
he wouldn't take off work to witness  
the detachment  
the cloth colored jar I wanted to see into—

These days when he asks me how I feel  
I tell him he still owes me his half of the procedure

## MY THING WITH B

When I arrive at my ex-baby father—because I had the abortion—  
when I arrive at my ex-baby father brother's house  
he has on a big smile and he hugs me long until it's clear he wants me  
and he says LOOK HOW LONG AND PRETTY YOUR HAIR HAS GOTTEN SINCE I LAST SEEN YOU IN '09  
When I look up at him  
smile at his dark brown  
tell him THANK YOU  
he says GIRL                      YOU TURN ME ON.  
I ask him EVEN AFTER MY THING WITH B? because I want him to know how nasty he is  
and he says EVEN BEFORE THAT  
like it was about timing—

he expects he will wet me up now  
get to come in me  
thinks he can make my honey sweeter  
dip and twist his late dick in abortion blood    or abortion cum  
that he now, too, will slip out and spill his liquid white  
let his thick bare brown finish its convulsions on my shaking open thighs  
because he couldn't somehow do it before B,  
  
or before his thing.

## KRIS AND I IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

Kris and I we talk over loose-leaf green tea and rose at her house.  
We talk yoni steams: draping skirts and our bodies over boiling pots  
of rosemary calendula lavender and yarrow in the middle of graduate school.  
We talk toning the uterus, reproduction, birthing babies, the raspberry leaf  
for her cramping, and we talk 26-day cycles of blood and contractions and how  
to balance the ovaries. We talk damiana and cervical mucus, the coming,  
and Kris, she apologizes for having left her panties on her bathroom floor.

Kris and I take a break from our brown skin,  
or we return to it and take a trip to the natural grocer  
and we grab more than the almond milk and black beans for dinner—  
we talk aloe vera for healing and throw it in the cart we share  
and we think to buy the dandelion detox tea because sometimes  
the warm lemon water in the morning isn't enough to release  
the poison we still sometimes consume.

Kris and I see royal jelly and talk about how much in a daily dosage  
and we talk fertility and having babies again.  
And Kris says I should have a baby and I think she should have a baby:  
fill ours wombs with honey and semen and limbs and other parts of our children  
so we grab the royal jelly from its shelf and find winter oils  
to protect our growing skin & hair.

## YEARS AFTER YOU DIE

I am just getting to know things about you  
maybe I was too young to know the story  
my father tells me about how once a man kicked you  
in the stomach and it must have been hard enough  
he says to put you in the hospital  
where he tells you he wanted to put a bullet through  
the man's head once he found him and  
how you were my father's sidekick  
the two of you closer than everyone thought  
when y'all said y'all broke up and  
how once he tries to break down your door  
bangs at it for you so hard  
the neighbors call the police  
and he has to hide  
somewhere in an alley in the dark  
all because he thought some other man  
was up there with you  
how he was always with you  
even when you were with someone else  
my stepfather for instance  
who he is angry with  
for having babies with you  
while he was away in prison

you were a once security guard he says  
but at home men break you again and again  
the man you sell hope for breaks you  
my grandfather breaks you  
my sisters' fathers break you  
my brothers' fathers break you  
the doctor breaks you open  
there is something you want  
taken out of you I think  
something as quick as the breath—  
you've given birth so many times  
it is easy for you to die

in April I go to your mother's grave.  
I know you went looking for her in Cleveland the year after I am born—

my stepfather tells me he helps you  
I don't know if you get the chance to touch her—  
you and I could be sisters how long we've been without our mothers.

Your mother's grave is mostly brown  
no headstone to identify her or to say how long she lived or had been dying.  
The attendants put out a purple flag with her name and plot number  
that I take home and place next to a photo of you—  
do you wonder what she thinks of you now: dead, too  
having your daughter looking for you, some garden of yours  
do you think she'd say something about the way  
men tell stories now that her body  
has settled in hard ground  
how much she ached and ached  
I don't know if she actually ached  
I know something must have driven her crazy  
the way they say she went crazy

and mostly I know  
these poems are spells for you  
or spells for me:  
my womanhood  
I want to know how to survive  
how to keep myself  
how to heal the body

SUNDAY 9:19PM CT

when I take the blunt            /touch your fingers            /inhale  
    /send your laughter  
    into my belly,  
I think about last Thursday/  
not being with just you:  
pushing up to downward facing dog,  
watching the tips of my locs belong on the floor.  
My other man doesn't come fast enough  
    even when I let him grip my thighs or say  
    he can release his cream anywhere on my body—  
    I think he wants to stay inside me all day. all day.  
        I don't tell you about him  
        You say you better be the only one

When I wave the blunt back in your direction  
you say I haven't smoked enough  
and I smoke more with you



PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

Once I escape Kansas – the awful pressure of its wind on my body sometimes and I go to an academic conference in Dallas, Texas where I meet a silver-bearded man on the airplane shuttle – when I tell him where I’m coming from he calls me *sweet Ms. Kansas* and later at his hotel he says my body is so beautiful so suddenly appearing out of nowhere it makes him ask if he can put what he calls his *big brick* through me – I watch him go between begging for it and demanding saying things like he has never tried too hard to fuck anyone and almost wants to make me – I think of him the next day how he was capable of making me

even if I refused

how I take my body to Dallas to read a paper on *The Street*

on mostly how Super attempts to make Lutie Johnson

how he rages when she screams out of being black and woman

## WHEN MY MOTHER WAS DECAY

On the morning of her surgery, my mother picked me up  
from my cousin's house and gave me Oreos, a parting gift,  
as if she knew she was going to die || but she didn't die  
immediately. That day my family and I saw her new body:  
still large and brown and her eyes still big  
sleepy and numb from the anesthesia.

We had expected the surgery to work right away.

We did not expect her to occupy the hospital for seven months,  
for her ankles to swell, the medical socks, the smell of decay and  
open blisters and gauzes when her left breast turned rock solid and black.

We did not anticipate the amputation, her long breasts as removable,  
and the use of skin from her thigh to cover the phantom complication of fleshy white.

My mother told us she wanted her flesh (gone), her stomach (the size of an egg),  
her thighs (gapping) and her body (so slim and tender it would  
slide from the bone). And when, instead, her body began to loosen,  
when her skin began dragging slow and dry and cracking at the incisions,  
she still laughed, squealed and opened her mouth so wide the wind  
knocked her head back, and yes, the men still came, said they weren't  
particular about bodies or death or hospital beds—  
on the day she died, they all showed up demanding to be her husband on paper.  
Tima reasoned that he was the last to fuck her, but  
we chose my stepfather because he was the last to give her children.

My mother: said she would die when she was thirty-six,  
but she was actually thirty-seven, so we delayed the wake and built a casket  
that would fit her still large body.

We dressed her in white and sewed her eyes shut  
so the medicine wouldn't leak and disturb the congregation.

And the mortician said we needed to buy a sock to stuff her bra  
and gloves to hide her blistered hands.

We buried my mother's body eight days into September  
in the soil of a cemetery on 17th avenue, and ate soul food in the basement  
of the church and some at my grandfather's house where he showed me a picture  
of my birth grandmother (dead at 37), and he said she was crazy  
and had drank herself into a closet to break and die alone,  
and he said he was sorry he had given Tracy up,  
and he said his limp and his heart were too heavy to help carry her casket,  
but that he remembered holding my mother the day she was born.

On the day of her death, the actual day, I watched my mother die for a while,  
and held her hands beneath the blankets in ICU while my aunts sung to her  
and told her she could let go and go home if she wanted.  
And when the doctor said she had less than an hour, I looked at the clock  
above her head, then back at the blood seeping out of her nose and ears.  
My eldest brother and I left her body with my aunts at the hospital:  
still large, now shuddering like she had just begun to fear the decay.

On the day of my mother's death, the actual day, we faced the hot August  
Sunday from the porch where my brother said it was all fucked up  
grilled chicken breasts and carved numbers and the round shape of her face  
into my grandparent's wooden stairs.  
He left the porch for a swisher and soda  
and returned with cookies, and I thought she wouldn't die at all.  
But after my aunt called and said she had passed, and after my stepfather came  
home with her things—her gown, and the OSU hospital cup with her lipstick  
at tip of the straw, some of the things she no longer needed, it became true.  
In her journal, we find the funeral papers she completed just 18 days before that one—  
There was no place for her signature.

On the day of her death—the actual day, we do not go back for her dead body.  
We wait for our cousins to bring napkins for the stains  
of barbeque and tears dragged down our cheeks.

## LIKE THERAPY FOR THE MEN OR THE PLEASURE

On my walk to therapy this morning, I smell the silver bearded man's  
cologne on someone passing by and it triggers stillness  
the memory of him scanning my frame when he laid me  
out like an X on the hotel bed in Dallas, whispering something  
about my body summoning his tongue and my locs  
like thick ropes he wanted swinging over his head.

I tell my therapist about the silver bearded man and  
that some days, like today, I pull my hair  
all the way up so the men don't get to it.  
And I tell him that my father thinks I love him, *really* love him  
because ours moon are in Scorpio— my body so mean and so possessive  
that he thinks I always want a man and sex  
when sometimes all I want to eat is kansas and bread and honey.

And I tell my therapist I want men to keep eroticizing me  
but to do it on paper because that's where the poem is  
the spell is the prayer.  
And I tell him about wanting to piss in my professor's mouth  
when he told me my shit ain't sophisticated  
like I crave sophistication or like that shit is attainable  
when you're writing poems about abortions and fucking multiple men  
or like that shit is attainable for a bitch with skin thick and brown enough—  
or for a bitch with hair long and loc'd enough to lynch erections and bodies

## BLACK GIRLS

Black girls try to memorize theories to save themselves,  
try to revive their pretty browns tight and significant.  
My white girlfriend, skinny thing, not much ass to carry,  
quotes Janelle Monáe on her Facebook page,  
and I think it is easy for white girls to say the body  
isn't for male consumption when they've never been  
eaten up, or no, to say the body isn't for male consumption  
when their pretty white isn't said to eat men automatically.  
I want to ask my white girlfriend if she knows Janelle's song  
might just be for us to echo, her dance for the pretty brown areolas  
already in the pits of eyes and bellies, for the pretty brown  
Jezebels reading theory, twirling dicks between their teeth  
while lying on their backs.

## BODY AFTER THE GYM

Tonight I run 2 miles at the gym then go see  
the weed man. He is a tall white lanky thing  
packing a fourth into a Ziploc bag for me.  
I think to myself that he is sexy because he moves  
slowly and looks me in the eye when he takes my cash.  
I smile at him and think I must like white men, too.  
Tonight I also sit in the middle of my bed  
and surround myself with crystals  
because I believe I am a witch: living off moons and vibrations.  
Smoking the purple he gave me and  
running back Alice Walker lines        I think maybe it will  
piss God off if don't  
notice myself, too:        the way my thighs have  
come to look like a track athlete's thighs—  
I remember the time a white woman looks me up in down  
while I am getting dressed in the gym's locker room.  
She says I must have always been this thin and pretty  
jokes how she'd keep her man from me if he were still alive.  
Tonight I remember how I used to dream of only dancing  
the way a leotard might fit me now or even jazz shoes  
how I've wanted to be a famous woman—  
books written about the use of my body

#### KRIS AND I ON SEASON 4 OF SCANDAL

Kris and I say we still want to be Olivia Pope: all that power up in the white house  
and our clicking heels in the air at home. The scholars might say we're Jezebels  
(and say our white men named Lincoln) but we're academics too  
even with all our daddy's picked-out-dicks inside us.

Kris and I say we want to be Olivia Pope: white coats and to be fucked on video.  
We want to trade in our locs for curlier like versatile hair and  
live on deserted islands with white men and make jam with them in Vermont.

And Kris and I we want to sweat out our silk presses in somebody's chambers,  
and save black men and fuck them and save them 'til our white hats are brown.

Kris and I say we want to be Olivia Pope somehow: all that brown pussy up in the academy  
like we're Olivia Pope in Kansas and all the men are white and want to watch us  
and like all the men are black and want to save us as if we don't read the Literature too  
like we, too, ain't got beef with kansas and power and men and the system  
like Kris, Liv, and I don't pay attention—

Kris and I want to be Olivia Pope sometimes: all that red wine spilled on white couches  
and us all sexed up for a reason and  
we got our daddy's picked-out-dicks inside us like we just can't love white men  
or we just can't fuck black men without a hat or a cape

Kris and I we want to be Olivia somehow: all that power and all that brown pussy  
up in the academy. The scholars might say we're Jezebels too  
(say our black men still need saving, our white hats not enough brown).  
And the scholars might miss us and all that bark and bite and us handling shit  
while being gawked at and fixed and subjugated for a reason  
like we ain't academics who won't pull clips  
on the academy's picked-out-dicks inside us.

## A TALK OVER STRAWBERRIES

The white boy cashier says a few  
of my strawberries are molded  
that he'll find me a good batch  
as he knows where the good fresh ones are.  
He asks if I'm one of those ladies with  
sixty cats because I put two types of cat  
treats on the conveyer belt.  
I tell him I have a big kitty that likes to eat  
and he laughs and wants to know  
if I'm doing anything on Sunday  
if I want to run the Kansas River trails with him  
that it will be muddy with a chance of rain  
and it might be cold but he'll bring tea and blankets  
for after.  
I tell him yes  
and he trapezes the carton  
of perfect-red strawberries between the plums.



LUTIE'S ADVICE ON SURVIVING BLACK AND WOMAN

Lutie Johnson warns me about white men.

She says, even in Kansas, their thick white dicks  
will destroy by body as they attempt to enter me.

I tell Lutie Johnson that my thick, bricked brown craves  
the root: the flesh of white men creaming white  
onto my soft brown, pointed breasts.

I tell her I want a cold white finger running straight  
up my slim brown back and breaking my body  
at my thin brown waist.

I tell Lutie I want to stop avoiding the white man's attempts  
to lay with me the way black men lay with me (or don't lay with me  
because I don't weigh enough or weigh too much—can't balance them, that  
I will do it because black men only have me sometimes if I am saving  
their thick black flesh from cracking at the back)—

Lutie, I swear, I will give them permission  
to eat me the way black men try  
if I can sing and swing my hips into the academy  
and out of these blues almost the way you tried in Harlem—

But, Lutie says if I sleep with the white man I met at the bar,  
no matter how nice he is, or take the weed man's thick white wind  
and be on my bare brown knees sucking his skin like I am used to it...  
she says if I enchant white men, shake my thick brown thighs for them  
in a dark bedroom like on lit stage or pavement,  
and make the skin ripple for eyes that naturally gawk and gaze...  
if I posture my long legs and warm mouth open for them to examine, look into...  
if I say yes, white man place your dick here to ride my tongue,  
she says no matter her grandmother's remedy,  
if I swallow the thick white (no matter how particular),  
my black female body will stiffen and break at the neck—  
*oh, she says how your beautiful brown skin will become resigned.*

PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

mostly I try my best to be a poet / but or so my body wanders and for years I am a dancer /  
learning to use my body from a tall brown woman named Ms. April / she teaches me to isolate my  
hips / to lift my sternum / to balance on the balance me own weight in flat backs and jazz turns—  
A few weeks ago I find her living near Kansas City / I want to know if she remembers me / how I  
am eight when I begin / eleven when I quit all of a sudden in the middle of summer intensive—

I want to ask her if she could teach me again to be whole / to leap / to exist between vinyl and page  
and sound and body and grit until there is sweat all over me dripping years of pain and yearning. I  
want to tell her my mother is dead / how the one who sewed her African-print pillows is dead or  
died too soon / how she stopped sewing / ceased using her hands and her breath

how I don't ever want anyone

or even my body to stop me

the way my mother is stopped

WRITE/RIOT

My last lover calls me yesterday and said he'll be here in Kansas in June  
and I begin to want the sex about migration.

If I travel to Baltimore to riot, it will also be to find someone to make me  
choreography where I am gripping at my own skin  
pressing the balls of my feet into concrete  
making my body bourrée across quicksand or water,  
have it eaten and swallowed by cities  
invite color, sex, and poetry back to the landscape of K-K-kansas.

I want to write sex like the nineteenth and twentieth-century novels  
where it is about color and hair and Anglo Saxon machines  
like Helga Crane's Naxos  
My Kansas written backwards  
suggests its lack—  
I mean to write women moving  
women breaking  
glass and concrete  
not fading for lovers  
not dying to own  
the self

## MORNING

When I awake this morning  
I immediately want the red wine I began  
before sleeping last night.  
I skip meditation and just journal, just put on Drake  
and ask God why I didn't resign  
and take the white man home to fuck him last night.  
I repeat an episode of *Broad City*, the one where  
Abby and Alana confront patriarchy and Western medicine  
and I remember I left my coconut curry  
behind at the restaurant.  
If I go back there tonight / order a full meal  
I wonder if he will be there with some other woman  
talking universe and how he reads seven books at once  
(15 minutes a day on each book).  
I wonder if he would boring the fuck out of her.

By afternoon one of the men I used to love in Ohio  
asks me about the dinner after I posted a funny story  
about it to Facebook: he says nothing about me has changed:  
that I still go on dates just to get fucked.  
I do not respond to his messages.  
I have no feminist response, no black feminist response.  
He is just trying to be important.  
He wants his sleepy eyes on my breasts  
and his baby momma with my name in her mouth.

When I pray this morning,  
I tell God I want my last lover  
because he said he knew me for real  
and always had a smile and brown skin for me at his door.

He always fucked me and said thank you.  
The first time we met, we stood at each other's bodies  
talking directions and humidity.  
He said my sweaty brown looked good in pink  
and before he left me, he said he had asked for my number  
because I said something with my eyes and because I stood  
with my hip out in the middle of Kansas—

I decide I want to keep black men:  
how I am obsessed with their thick browns facing mine  
their pearling bodies when they walk on concrete  
their thick stories about how their fathers  
used to love their mothers curdling in their throats  
behind the yelling and reaching to touch my pretty brown  
behind their tongues curving up the side of my neck when we get there.  
I tell them, my father, I think, still wants me to love him  
but I have stopped answering his calls since he dropped  
his needles at my feet during my visit home.  
And really because he could never distinguish  
between my mother's body and my own.

LIKE KANSAS: A BLUES

This morning I am in Kansas  
finishing the last of the blunt  
we shared.  
“I’m high” you said  
and we stopped smoking to make love with our tongues and our breaths—

But, this is not Kansas  
just its Topeka and humidity—  
can’t  
call out your name now | say *baby* to you |  
ease myself onto your dick again | feel inside  
me again magic | or my body responding  
to your body | squirt spells on your belly

I don’t want to fuck anyone else until I fuck you again:  
have your spit dripping toward my nipples | your dick  
tapping my teeth | your magic in my throat |  
your magic on my cheek  
again

I want to be on top of you or near you until my body  
convulses or pretends it can’t speak—

I want to chain smoke fire with you so I can lick the ashes  
from your fingertips | have you lick the nectar from my fingertips |  
have you swallow the laughter from my fingertips  
until we are high enough to really  
pray to God—

to ask Her to make time the same time  
and make distance a place in the middle  
like Kansas

LIKE THE TIME FOR WANTING, OHIO

Sometimes I am lying across my couch in Kansas  
texting you: *I want to do the things we used to do*  
like the time I come home and meet you in a hotel  
after your sister's wedding  
where you say you miss me, how I never stay in Ohio long enough and  
ask why I stopped eating at Waffle House with you.

Mostly I say I wanted a different body – something slim  
and mostly you say you'll always want me  
like even if you're married, you'd still fuck with me—  
like the time you spend a week with me in Kansas  
though you have a woman you tell all ten years  
we've been just friends, or too close for her to know the difference—

I like being your always or almost woman  
never having to birth your children,  
though I do want to ask why you want me so much  
but not at all  
*why you want me so much?*

I still watch you  
rock back in fourth between rap melodies / smile at me  
draw swirls with your blunt  
like you're doing a deeper magic /  
I like smoking after you  
I like wanting more from you  
and having  
any time I want

## PRECLUDE

There is sex on my Instagram.

I like to be sex on my Instagram.

Like to look like a witch and say cute shit

about the man I've been sleeping with—

I tell him I like him when I like his shit.

We text about sex sometimes. Have sex there sometimes.

Screen protector like a condom

or coconut oil on the clitoris.

I say shit like baby,

let me slurp down that big ass dick.

But, sometimes I just spit on the tip

on some cute ass shit

and send nudes with my locs and my eyes cut out—

Please, white boys, don't break my iCloud;

Job market got restrictions on pussies that don't hide out—



PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

I stand up a man in Cleveland and he forgives me after four months of not speaking  
to me. I tell him create boundaries if you feel you need, beloved – you will be still be mine  
but I don't really want him

I just want him to say to say he needs me / to call me  
a bad woman

for promising him pussy and babies  
with no intention of giving him anything  
at all

YOU SAY YOU BETTR BE THE ONLY ONE

He thinks he is my man  
the way he slides into me from behind  
and makes me grip my hip flexors instead  
of hitting my chest—  
I tell him his dick is magic / something I haven't had before /  
something that makes me collapse  
onto the bed / cease sending my body backwards  
into his palms and gasps—

On nights when you aren't in Kansas  
or leave me  
I let him finish / draw what's left  
of your cologne from my mouth  
and my skin

Yes, I say I want only you / would let only you /  
say it's yours / only yours –  
Yes, baby – I know lie to you  
but don't you lie to me

## THE SEX

The SEX is even in the onions and yes the sweet potatoes and cauliflower. And I may add spinach to go with the black beans. And yes, the sex is in the chocolate, the dark chocolate, the 87% cacao. It ain't sex if it ain't cacao or dark or leaning on me. I like the weight of sex. I keep the dates of sex. And yes I creamed the butter that softened the brown rice noodles because I like the taste of sex.

PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

when I read these poems aloud at an open mic for the first time a man sends me a private message on Facebook in which he says he can't wait to see me and hear my sexy poems again and immediately I have to block him and try to hide my body from him in public

## MY BOY

Back home, my boy  
tugs at my necklace:  
the eye of Horus I own bent over my collar bone for protection –  
he touches my thigh and says LOOK, GIRL, I WANT YOU  
I know hoping my body would instinctively open and spread for him  
his sweat drop into my skin like warm tears or thick rain  
as he is pounding me

I tell my boy it's not like that: I'm not trying to fuck you  
and he pulls back                      paces  
doesn't look me in the eye anymore      or call me now—

I hit the blunt  
ask my nigga if he's good: if it's okay that I don't want to fuck him  
he says IT IS WHAT IT IS MONI,  
I AIN'T MAD AT YOU  
                    but I am angry  
just think how hard he must have been  
when he expected me wet  
contracting  
his thick brown into pulses and oscillations  
his eyes rolled  
tongue dripping an orgasm he wanted  
to tell our boys about

Today, on my walk to the gas station for a swisher and a bottle of water, a group of men call at me from across the street. I look at them and shake my head, and when I come out of the store, I know one of them will drive their big blue truck across the street to find and follow me, and yes they pull up on me: the man with the gold horse teeth stops cuts me off with the big blue truck and they say *it's okay, it's okay, we not gone hurt you, do nuthin'* and their words echo, and a man in a neon green short sleeve shirt and matching shoes and a blue hat and square sunglasses and big round eyes gets out of the big blue truck and tells the driver with the horse teeth he can park, and he asks me my name and I tell him my name, my real name because I don't want to appear afraid, and he says something about him working up at the school and he asks me if he can see me sometimes and I want to tell this nigga to get the fuck up out my face but I tell him I have a man so he gets the message, but he still asks for my number and I tell him I'll take his instead and he asks the other man with the short hair waves and sweaty wrinkled brow to throw him his phone (he does not move his body, he keeps peering over his sunglasses with his big round eyes at me) and then he tells me something that begins with 601 and I save it as Del because he says that's his name and he asks me for a hug and I tell him *no*, and he says *that's okay I'll take one, I'll take uh hug* and I cringe when he stoops down and wraps his arms and bitter cologne around my body, and I see the two men in the truck watching and I want to know what they wonder about men and power or black men and power, about why their man wanted to touch me so badly—

after he uncloaks his body from my breasts and shoulders, he walks away and says *savvy bu' we saw uh beautiful black queen and I jus had tuh say hi, you'uh beautiful black woman* he said, and the men in the truck smile with their chins hanging and ask me if I have any *cuhzins*.

FROM KANSAS

October today reminds me of  
humming your name beneath the  
bass of my favorite song for us:  
*Baby, it's yours* I want to swirl in my mouth when  
the sun reaches for my body this morning.  
How cold it is without your breath  
huffing against mine or without your fingers  
wrapped around my waist tapping and grabbing  
each of our moans  
Is there such a sweater or  
man to mimic the loving we made this Saturday  
last year?

I wish Arizona were Kansas—  
thought you'd /pretend you were leaving /

walk with stillness /  
have no bend in your knees / or no breath in another zone/

thought you'd /stay here /  
or erase the lines  
in our country—  
have October reach for you and me at the same time  
like how God pushed you into my body when I saw first you

I tell myself there is still prayer  
in October—  
just have to reach you again or  
be on my knees doing God's work  
with your body

ONCE A MOTHER

at 15 my mother is my mother

alive and I tell her she will  
never meet my children

not knowing because  
she would be dead now.

at 15 —just a child— I tell my mother  
to go ahead and die then

since she says she will  
and I think it is a threat

to leave me. I keep the picture  
of her in a casket somewhere

in my apartment. Her face  
is a cold brown and flat

the way she predicted  
or wanted

or she tried to warn me

or I also knew

she'd died  
being so large and brown  
being handled by men  
accordingly /  
wanted  
or not wanted  
dead or still



## BODY KANSAS

How come ripe bananas always  
remind me both of your presence  
and your absence: our scenes  
on the couch where I have  
retired my body on your lap  
and you are watching my face from  
the swisher and the fire?  
If Kansas had banana trees,  
I'd always have your curve  
and your sweet.

If you were here now—  
if Kansas were Kansas  
and not the dirt  
beneath my apartment  
I'd sit at my window with you  
ask you to recall the day we  
painted the trees brown (appearing  
dead but the closest to our breath),  
or the day we broke cottonwood  
from our bodies  
and planted it in the earth—  
but you'd have no idea.

If you were here—  
I know everything is so contingent  
on your being Kansas  
but if I had your body back  
in the root of me, my partial Kansas river  
I'd ask your body to release your children  
and drown them inside my womb.

PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

most of the women I date say they don't know why they are always attracted to straight women and I know they mean me: femme and having wanted men –what does it mean to prefer women sometimes now – or how do I express sexual complexity without becoming it?

PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

The second time I watch Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, I am in an undergraduate feminist film course where we read bell hooks who argues Nola Darling isn't free at all—her unabashed sexuality was written by men for men trying to clear their names.

My white classmates say “poor black girl” or something similar and my professor says “yes / race / woman / look-at-edness” and we begin marking the moments at which her body is not on screen or being touched. Nola's body is everywhere / always being touched.

I am not sure if I am Nola Darling or not Nola Darling, or trying to resist being Nola Darling, over-determined/ written to be gazed at / trying to gaze back but raped for it. My body is mine, but many men, too, will say they've had it because they've had it, or they want me, too, to promise my body is theirs. Academia makes me write a dissertation to clear my name:

I begin: I am not a jezebel. My body has been made up. My erotic has been made up.

And actually: I am or want to be angry about it, some attempt at a blues woman. I read poems to remake the self. I write poems to remake the self.

My mother tries to remake her body but dies as soon as she begins, or as she is ending.

RE-MEMORY

when my sister Tiffany and I  
visit my mother's grave  
the soil is broken open and  
her headstone is rocking in Ohio wind—

we believe she is trying to come up

we believe now that we are standing there together  
two of her four daughters: her agency / her magic  
she wants to touch us at the same time

KANSAS, CONTINUED IN WINTER

dick is not guaranteed in Kansas—  
sometimes JB tells me *no* and sometimes he makes me listen,  
so I might still fuck Leon though sex left his two-inch thick  
double stacked frame when JB began sliding me up  
and down his dick—I think my body felt like it was on fire  
but I have never been able to describe sex.

*Yes you can.* JB says. *Describe it to me.*  
*I don't know.* I tell him. *It's like wanting to hit myself.*

but  
there is no dick for Black women  
in Kansas  
because we prefer sex that  
enters us from behind and tell us  
things that we ought to know  
  
but sometimes JB says things  
in other places and we still taste like debris.

And once,  
he said my pussy felt like home.

I think he knew  
I was the healer.

## BLOOM TIME

Mostly I lie to my therapist  
when he asks if I ever think  
about being unfaithful to the  
woman I'm with now.  
I mean how do I say  
to this mindful ass white man:  
I'm a bad woman  
too, or I'm not so good  
at being good to anybody  
who hasn't been good to me  
so yes the man I say has been  
tempting me  
gave me some of that dick again  
the other day. And I ask him why  
we ever stopped, is it that he  
didn't miss it enough.  
He says *no, come here come here*  
and opens me up again.  
When I tell my best friend I do it  
because the relationship is heavy  
a trauma I've never imagined myself carrying  
how I just want some real single / hoe ass shit popping  
in my apartment again, he says *welcome back*  
*you a bad bitch beloved*  
*you can have anything you want*  
I say you right, you right I want everything and mostly  
I want to be  
my own  
best thing

YEARN TIME

Janie Crawford's Tea Cake dies the novel says  
for loving her and I wonder  
who must die for loving me  
if the one I want to be my man  
will touch me again before he  
dies in Arizona with his new woman  
and baby boy.

Let me walk back into the gates  
of my community with my hair down  
my back and my chin straight up  
talked about but uninterrupted /  
having been with lowdown men but uninterrupted –  
On a visit back home when I overhear my stepfather  
asking my sister if I'll ever have children since  
I'm sleeping with women now  
and I'm like there are so many  
'TTC videos on YouTube and anyway  
he must know I still want children / can still birth them  
even though they haunt me:

When I am a young girl, I watch  
*Waiting to Exhale* with my girl cousins Tasha and Kourtney.  
They say I have to play Robin  
so I anticipate the married men, the abortion  
the blood, references to the *lady in blue*—  
how everyone knew  
and told me to keep it  
though how much it hurt to be there alone  
to have him waiting for me to say I'd done it –  
Now, people want to know  
if I regret it or if I would do it again  
and I think they want to know  
how could I live with myself  
how just days after the procedure  
I wanted to be pregnant again –  
it must be about yearning  
it must be about desire  
to have and to keep a baby  
to give birth this time

## BODY CRAFT

The white woman who teaches  
my weight lifting class approaches me  
in the locker room while I am at the sink  
applying rose hip oil to my cheeks.  
She asks if I am still tutoring football players  
and says they couldn't possibly take me seriously—  
*you're so pretty*, she says.

The former football player who fucks  
me sometimes says I am witch because  
I make my own cuticle strengthener:  
equal amounts of almond, rice bran,  
jojoba, and five drops of lavender  
essential oil in a small mason jar.  
When he takes down my panties  
in the middle of my living room  
he says I think I must be the  
shit because I am dressed in all  
black and have my long nails painted  
black in the middle of winter.



## SLEEPING

She says last night I was all over the bed  
pushing her to the edge of it  
and I am laughing with her  
because I remember how this started with you—  
If appropriate I would say your name  
recall aloud the time you text me  
a picture of a comforter with the words  
*his side* and *her side* stitched on separate sides  
of a big bed  
*his side* on white background and *her side*  
on black but his side  
significantly more narrow  
You say 'Lol this made me think of you'  
and today I know what it is like to want to leave  
someone and not just for someone else  
but maybe for a big bed I can be alone in  
or for choosing which side to tangle my body  
in sheets, or I almost tell her of the time I am ready  
to leave her like how I have him on the couch  
and he has his fingers pearling in me  
before I tell him no  
I want him to leave too  
(like how you go and have babies on me)  
but he begs me to keep my clothes off  
to take him where she and I sleep  
he says he knows I miss it but do I remember  
do I remember how he feels —  
he says he certainly remembers the ocean  
that is my body  
What do you know now  
about the space I take up

I want it back I want it back

RITUAL NO. 30

today I shower and pray over  
my body for the first time in a long time  
I tell my godmother it is time, I want to  
be my own best thing, how do I begin?  
She suggest lavender and honey tea  
over turmeric and also asks  
if I've smudged my crystals lately – no, I tell her  
then put black obsidian inside me and smoke weed all day.

I figure all I need is company sometimes  
not to have my space invaded by love  
that ain't love at all  
how do I be angry  
how do I come back to myself  
what I've always wanted  
without destroying everything—  
how come there are so many women  
on my Facebook asking how to leave or move on?  
My brother tells me shit do it like mommy  
be blunt like the time she pulls out a 9 shot .22  
on my stepfather and tells him if Mrs. Bernadette  
is that good to him then take his red ass down there  
and be with her, *you stupid mothafucker*.

I've tried and like my mother have  
given things my all  
and they still fuck up and  
everybody got me fucked up  
I tell my therapist—

I listen to podcasts each morning now  
learn to laugh at the men I've fucked  
then reread Ms. Sanchez  
learn to gaze at myself instead of shifting it  
learn to run myself water and bathe and drink  
to become political about my yearning  
erotic about my healing

OOH GIRL, OR HUMMING OR DANCING

Ooh girl            you know you the moon

I mean dear god            dear God

you the moon because ain't nobody got pussy or prayers like you girl

And you black and woman like your mother like Sula and Janie and Helga and Lutie but  
ain't nobody got your jazz and don't nobody vibrate the blues the way you do—

Ooh girl                    this your world            girl.

Ooh God            you dance and sing

and dance and I've read you try to do the right things girl

PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

*Post in a private Facebook group for women who work with yoni eggs:*

Hello, beauties!! Quick story and QUESTION!! So, yesterday I planned to do a little ritual and do some writing today. It included connecting with my sodalite yoni egg. This morning I showered then smudged my little beauty. After all the cleansing and praying I lay back on my bed and rubbed her all over my body then placed her right on my clitoris. Then suddenly the urge to pee! But I continued because I was thinking *maybe I don't have to pee*

I rubbed and rubbed again then I was like *nah I have to pee* so I pushed a little since I had a towel down Lol...nothing. I got up put the towel on the floor squatted over the towel and rubbed her against my yoni then the urge again.

I was like well let me just let go and see what happens: ALL OF THIS CLEAR LIQUID CAME RUSHING OUT OF ME!

Was that urine...or was that me ejaculating into a towel? Lol! I drink a lot of water and I had just tinkled before our little session. And I've gushed/squirted before but that was A LOT  
You all may not have the answer...just thought I'd put this out there

MOTHER-LESS

dear God

I am years without

my mother now:

motherless or dead in a daughter way—

my younger sister has to tell her children

that our mother is dead /

someone who existed before they were born

I show them a picture and they confirm it

for me: that's you, auntie! Oh, no that's

grandma. You look like her

but she is dead.

I do not want to say yes.

I want to say she is sleeping. Tired even.

I want to tear into my body

and find her inside me.

I want to have her children

the ones she makes and keeps out of

rage

out of wanting a body of her own—

but I want to live. I want to live.

## ON NEVER TELLING

dear mother we found the daughter  
you had to give up before keeping us.  
She already knew you were dead  
or had a feeling in her gut  
about it. Did you ever see her in public  
recognize her face  
tell us to turn our heads  
before we recognized ourselves in her?  
If you hadn't given her up  
would I still have been born?  
You are a magician of death  
take live secrets to your grace  
You can make your daughters disappear  
make their fathers say they never  
put things inside you

## DREAMT MOTHER

I dream of my mother a few nights ago:  
she is on the other side of the couch  
and her eyes are so big she doesn't  
need to speak – I stare into them.  
*You're so beautiful*, I say,  
*let's take a selfie*  
and she is so dead  
she doesn't know what I mean

when I dream of her again  
the very next night  
I stab her in the belly  
so hard and so deep  
she stiffens and falls  
and I have to say someone else did it  
Someone else opened my mother  
at the core of her and let her blood memory  
spill until she is dead or a myth

the doctors said  
her brown body: too hernias  
six cesareans too many  
couldn't handle being  
a small woman  
and in fact she could never be  
a small woman with a body full  
of a brown woman's living

LOOK

splits so deep  
my pussy kisses  
the blue yoga mat / i came up in here with  
bitch                    you so average:  
cat cows / backbends / sun salutations: gained

I : born this way : double dutched double-jointed blood / black girl / Gabby girl / black magic  
thick thighs yes stretch too      hips mimic elastic / i : breathe and slip / sustain  
the weight of your instructions in my wrists—  
in child's pose i                    worship Misty's  
tip      toe                    ball pointed calves  
ask her to      forgive me      for  
                 being  
                 here  
and no longer  
                 dancing

before  
you want me : eyes locked on my contortion  
say *how beautifully limber*  
then, you: yoga trained / body forced / skin thinned  
flip through Yoga Journal / study my *hypermobility*:  
practice my body in your bedroom mirror / tell me  
*watch your knees / try not to hyperextend / rise*  
to correct me / say I must  
get headaches from good sex and stretching / say  
also *be sure to level your hips* / as if  
it is my first time / blooming into half moons  
you couldn't imagine

you think  
god must have birthed broken brown bodies  
forgot to thread the joints of all the blue black trap niggas--

Look here : I'm a don't-need-a-strap-nigga  
core strength so live  
*padangustasana* so steady / twisted  
in eagle pose/ my eyes closed/ you watch me  
                 exhaled a standing split/ when i used to strip/ tipped



twenties stuck to the back of my thighs/ still  
not afraid of my body :  
yoga right next to you  
like I'm your 500- hour teacher  
last name like your Savasana  
yoga right next to you  
cuz  
I'm even savage in mudras

and yo ya man in the back  
twists his neck to see me without permission  
after class tells me he can't help but watch me in the mirror  
wants to know what else stretches that wide—  
*sweetheart how long you been into this*  
*cause you do it so easy*  
wonders if I saw Serena's match that day  
*you must be her sister Venus*  
he says  
body  
a hot  
yoga train of flesh  
he reaches out to touch me

PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

I do not write poems about sex / orgasms are too short on the / page and the nudes don't come out  
right / my man's dick is not hard enough in a poem /

because my professor wants to fuck me—

he suggests a classmate reach out to me

about writing something more *erotic*

how she asks to make the page the body

and make the body sound

## PERSONAL, OR HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT THIS IN A DISSERTATION

In 2009 I get pregnant the day or a few days after my nephew Breaker is born. A few months later my godfather asks if I have a poem for a liberation event – I say I have a poem for the way B made me cum real hard then begged me to have my first child vacuumed out of me and only gave me a hundred dollars on a four hundred dollar procedure – I have a ritual for disregarding men’s feelings now. For example a year after the thing, B says we shouldn’t have done it. And I say that was all me, my nigga – not you. my body: emptied and jarred.

MY MOTHER'S AGENCY ON RECORD

My mother gives birth to me and decides to keep me  
and I want to know how come she and Lutie Johnson can't leave  
or keep their children  
at the end of a novel without being bad women  
their love hopeless and not resistance  
lazy    not *Awakening*—

“BIRTH MOTHER WAS PSYCHOLOGICALLY EVALUATED IN 1987 AND DETERMINED  
TO HAVE AN IQ OF 99, WITH A DIAGNOSIS OF MIXED PERSONALITY DISORDER WITH  
IMMATURE AND INADEQUATE FEATURES. BIRTH MOTHER WAS ADOPTED AT THE AGE OF 3.  
[HER] BIRTH MOTHER REPORTEDLY SUFFERED FROM ALCOHOLISM, DRUG ABUSE AND  
EPILEPSY.”

My brother is old enough to recall my mother  
the day she gave Tiffany up  
how she sat up and cried in a hospital robe  
with her hand over her heart  
one hand signing documents that suggests  
she was too young and abused by her man  
to take care of any more of us  
or perhaps any more daughters.  
Even her mother says she won't  
put up with the way  
my mother keeps her body  
how fast she is  
to want to keep her children  
despite herself

## DELIBERATE

I thought I knew then  
when my mother passed / went  
dead / no longer the strength  
we swear on our salvation she had /  
lying there dying  
with a tube swirling air down her throat  
because her body weighed so heavy  
on her brown or her man – maybe she was deliberate –  
wanted to die—  
the surgery I think she knew  
was never made to work for her—

being  
beautiful: being black and a woman is difficult.  
I must be deliberate, I know now.  
Men (mis) read my dissertation / my poems / want to fuck me.  
Men ask me if I am a witch / if I know magic  
because my oils and my remedies sit on my bathroom counter  
and next to my bed / ready for use.  
I could heal at any moment  
make a body  
soften / the uterus still with molasses and raspberry leaves.  
A man in Texas says however it is mostly  
my long hair and almond like eyes  
that make him  
ask for me or demand I touch him  
how my body is a prayer  
the one where they won't ever do it again—

But these days I'm on my poetics

so heavy / my anger so deliberate  
I'm like naw don't touch me and  
fuck the woman who spreads my nudes  
across the internet then wants me back.  
She can't have me back.  
Fuck: the street that breaks my mother  
because I grew up there too:  
the same men bother me / tell me I look just like her.

and     Kansas / and every white bitch that has tried me  
or has touched me.  
and     the man who leaves me  
in Kansas loving him:  
I cry and I cry until he has a baby on me  
and now I'm like naw  
'cause once you call me *woman*  
and I know what commitment is

perhaps I'll die  
unkept  
or perhaps I enjoy being wanted  
dead  
maybe like my mother  
whom I believe is so beautiful: at 8 I witness her staring  
into her vanity mirror each morning  
applying make up and perfume  
listening to Blackstreet / we sing together: don't leave me, girl  
and she leaves me.  
A psychic: I believe she anticipates her death /  
writes it down for years in her journals  
some erotic spell  
my living: erotic

less about being wanted  
alive now

poem at thirty:

I've been practicing being h(a)unted  
and a woman  
being h(a)unted and won't you celebrate  
with me  
my mother refuses to give me up the way  
her mother gives her up  
or the way she is made to give up Tiffany  
or she doesn't kill me the way  
I make blood  
out of my first child  
I wanted—  
Our wombs are not dangerous  
wounded maybe  
and fact is B never deserved my children.  
He still wants to come in me  
even if it means I'd have to do it again.

My mother's first husband, Tim  
keeps saying he's Tiffani's father.  
After all these years he says he knew  
Tiffani was born and alive and given up  
but we tell him he doesn't deserve to claim her  
or any of us  
like *fuck you*  
*and your paternity test 'cause now niggas want clarity*  
*want children--*  
*you'll never know our mothers secrets*  
*or how we become COLLECTORS*

of ourselves

of the personal

of the bones

you break

in our eldest sister's body

of the men

we've wanted

wanted us

dead –

We pulled ourselves

into a yearning without permission

one political for survival



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